

THE DUMBARTON OAKS COLLECTION. STUDIES IN BYZANTINE ART

Report on the Symposium of 1958

SIRARPIE DER NERSESSIAN

THE programs of the symposia held in previous years at Dumbarton Oaks concentrated on a fairly restricted period or a particular manifestation of Byzantine civilization considered from the point of view of history, theology, literature, and art. The symposium of 1958, which was directed by the present writer, was devoted to the Dumbarton Oaks Collection; the fine arts, therefore, formed the focal point of the papers. Such a program had been under consideration for some time, and this seemed the appropriate year for presenting it as a tribute to the founders of Dumbarton Oaks, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, on the occasion of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, for they had assembled a large part of the Collection before it was conveyed to Harvard University, and they continue to take an active interest in it.

The program, though concentrated in a single field, covered a longer span of time than had been the case in previous years, ranging, as it did, from the period prior to the foundation of Constantinople down to the Palaeologan age. For obvious reasons architecture, monumental mosaics, and paintings were excluded from the studies; nor was there any attempt to consider all the categories of works of art represented in the Collection. Such a comprehensive program, presented in the relatively short time at our disposal, would have had, perforce, a somewhat superficial character. It was more important to select a few characteristic works or groups of objects in the Collection and, with these as a point of departure or concentration, to illustrate a particular aspect of Byzantine art or a special trend in the religious thought of the period.

The first paper, read by the present writer, served as a general introduction. It traced the growth of interest in Byzantine art, the gradual appreciation of its aesthetic qualities, and the formation of private and public collections, and it called attention to the impor-

tance of the objects in the field of the minor arts. This was followed by two lectures which are published in this volume. In the first, Ernst H. Kantorowicz showed, through the study of a marriage belt and a marriage ring, how Byzantium took over the themes of Roman imperial imagery and adapted them to a Christian context. In the second, Ernst Kitzinger drew attention to the importance of a fragmentary marble relief, showing Christ Healing a Blind Man, as a document of Christian narrative art in Constantinople in the period of Theodosius I.

A lecture by Marvin Ross on "Seventh-Century Byzantine Jewelry" presented a method of investigation based on grouping by "treasures" the objects which are scattered in various collections, in order to determine the centers of production and expansion. The evidence furnished by the coins found with these objects made it possible to date them more accurately.

The classical survival, considered in the second and third papers, also formed the central theme of the lecture by Kurt Weitzmann published in the present volume. The continued use of mythological subjects on silver plates and on ivories was shown to be but one of the manifestations of the classical tradition that influenced religious iconography. Conversely, mediaeval form was imposed on mythological representations, and occasionally Christian context modified mythological scenes.

In his lecture on "The Art of the Historiated Ampullae from the Holy Land," André Grabar discussed the reliefs on those phials from an artistic point of view rather than as examples of religious imagery. Comparisons with imperial medallions and their imitations in works of jewelry revealed the unity of subject and form proper to different series of objects which were produced in the same or in related techniques.

The lectures described above dealt primarily with works of the Early Christian period. Certain aspects of the religious art of the Middle Byzantine period were discussed in the lecture on "Two Images of the Virgin," by the present writer, which is published herewith.

The two final lectures, also included in this volume, were devoted to the Palaeologan period and brought out the characteristic traits of the artistic revival during this last phase of Byzantine history. In his study of "Two Palaeologan Miniature Mosaics," Otto Demus showed that although religious art returned to earlier models, it rendered them with a new and different emphasis. Secular art, on the other hand, and in particular palatine art, was more open to outside influences, and this point was discussed by André Grabar in connection with an ivory pyxis in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection.

This brief summary of the papers read during the symposium shows the wide range of its topics, each one of which dealt with some major trends or aspects of Byzantine art and Byzantine thought. Among the many points of interest that emerged from these discussions, one in particular deserves especial attention, namely, the pre-eminence of Constantinople. These studies, undertaken independently of one another and based on different groups or categories of objects, led

us back, in almost every instance, to the capital city as the source of production or inspiration.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, and occasionally even now, the leading role in the formation of Christian art was attributed to Rome. In violent reaction against these theories, Strzygowski opposed the Orient to Rome, transferring the creative center further east in his successive studies. Other scholars like Ajnalov, Millet, and Morey stressed the importance of the great cities of the East, in particular Alexandria and Antioch. The prestige of these centers of Hellenistic and late Classical culture tended to overshadow the role played by Constantinople and its share in the elaboration and development of Christian art. Through the discovery of new works and, even more, through the re-evaluation of those that had been known for a long time, though assigned to other centers, we now have a clearer picture of the artistic production of the capital. Without denying the importance of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor in the collective effort of the Early Christian period, scholars have become aware of the dominant role played by Constantinople throughout the centuries. As early as the fourth century, and especially from the sixth century on, Constantinople was the fountainhead which provided the ideas as well as the forms of Imperial and Christian imagery.